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SUBJECT: NK REFUGEES: OBSTACLES TO INTEGRATION IN THE SOUTH

REF: SEOUL 4131

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: North Korean refugees face an enormous culture shock in adjusting to life in the ROK. Not accustomed to South Korean political and economic systems and unable to compete educationally, North Koreans face difficulties obtaining stable employment. Their resettlement is not helped by indifferent -- and often hostile -- South Korean attitudes. Our interlocutors emphasized that while there was societal discrimination, discrimination was not practiced by the government. END SUMMARY.

WELFARE MENTALITY, FINANCIAL WOES IMPEDE INTEGRATION

2. (SBU) A study by North Korea Database center found that North Koreans identify several major reasons for difficulties in adjustment: 22 percent cited loneliness, 23 percent identified economic difficulties, 20 percent cited health problems, and 16 percent pointed to their lower social status and lack of work in the ROK.

3. (SBU) The Director of a welfare center that assists North Korean refugees said that the difference between the North and South Korean systems presents the biggest challenge for North Korean refugees in the ROK. Because North Koreans are used to the government or the party providing all necessities, they have a difficult time adjusting to a system where they are expected to provide for themselves, according to NK Net President Han Ki-hong. Heo Man-ho, Director of Research for Citizens' Alliance and Kyungpook National University Professor, explained that North Koreans are used to a system in which they do not have to work very hard, and that most North Koreans do not make the effort necessary to catch-up with their South Korean peers. NK Net's Han also noted that many North Korean refugees misunderstand the ROK's democratic, capitalist system, and tend to evade their responsibilities while asking for more entitlements.

14. (SBU) Venerable Pomnyun Sunim, head of the NGO Good Friends, noted that most North Koreans are not used to dealing with money, and do not have the monetary sense necessary in a capitalist society. When refugees have money they tend to spend it, and have difficulties saving. Many refugees also use their funds to pay brokers to bring their relatives out of North Korea, according to many NGO leaders. A North Korean refugee who arrived in the ROK in 2003 described being surprised at the material nature of the ROK, and said that many North Koreans do not have a good sense of how to handle their money with such an abundance of goods available.

LACK OF MARKETABLE SKILLS AND EDUCATION

15. (SBU) One NGO practitioner said that many North Koreans are crushed upon realizing their lack of access to desirable jobs in the ROK. One North Korean refugee, who is a student at a Korean university, said that many North Koreans arrive with unrealistically high expectations of life in the ROK. After some time in the ROK, he said, they become deeply disappointed when they see how hard they have to work to earn money. Many foreign workers may face the same sort of disappointment, he said, but they have another home to return to, whereas North Koreans do not. He lamented that, while life in North Korea was very hard, life in the ROK may be "mentally harder." He reported that he persuaded his older brother to remain in North Korea, telling him of his difficult life in the South.

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16. (SBU) North Korean refugees face large educational gaps compared to their South Korean peers, due to differences between the educational systems in North and South Korea and to often prolonged stays in third countries (reftel). Experts identify this issue as one the most difficult barriers that North Koreans must overcome in the resettlement process.

17. (SBU) Divergence in the Korean language used in North and South Korea also make education and employment difficult for the refugees. Gwak Jong-moon, Principal of the Hankyoreh Middle and High School, told us that North Koreans misunderstand as much as 30 percent of language in the ROK. Kim Young-ja, Secretary-General of Citizens Alliance, explained that the language gap was due to the use of foreign-derived words, especially English words, by South Koreans. In addition, 70 percent of the vocabulary, and most of the professional words, in South Korea consist of Chinese characters, which are alien to North Koreans because the DPRK encourages the use of "pure" Korean words. Differences in the provincial dialects also contribute to difficulties in communication between South and North Koreans.

PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA

18. (SBU) North Koreans have often faced life or death situations during the traumatic process of defection, and many refugees show signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other psychological disorders. Kim Eun-kyoung, a psychological counselor at Hanawon, reported that because of their experiences, many refugees are hypersensitive and distrustful. Kim said that all North Koreans receive psychological evaluations at Hanawon, and 20 to 30 percent are identified as needing special attention, typically for depression, personality disorders, emotional disorders, or PTSD. North Korean refugees are provided with psychological counseling while at Hanawon, but upon graduation most refugees want to focus on immediate life issues, Kim said. Kim noted that many North Koreans also face "life issues," including concerns about family members in other countries and about securing a stable life in the ROK, which are

difficult to separate from psychological issues.

¶9. (SBU) Many practitioners who work with North Korean refugees described other psychological issues that make North Koreans' successful adaptation difficult. NK Net President Han Ki-hong said that North Koreans are often very paranoid, typically from the constant fear in which many North Koreans lived in third countries. Citizens' Alliance President Benjamin Yoon noted that, in order to survive in North Korea and in third countries, North Koreans often have to be manipulative and opportunistic, and are often unable to shed such habits upon arrival in the ROK. Hanawon career counselor Jeon Yeon-suk noted that many women feel guilty about leaving their families behind. Pomnyun said that many North Korean refugees are unable to build a constructive vision for their life due to their anger and mistrust, and often respond violently to problems. Kim Eun-kyoung and other practitioners lament that mental health services for North Koreans are limited once they leave Hanawon.

LEGAL CHALLENGES

¶10. (SBU) In a recent report for the U.S. Committee on Human Rights in North Korea (USCHRNC), Kookmin University Professor Andrei Lankov estimated that the crime rate among North Koreans in the ROK is twice the national average. MOU reports that statistics on crimes by North Koreans are

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difficult to track because they are not categorized separately. NK Database President Yoon Yeo-sang noted that many North Koreans commit crimes to survive in North Korea and in third countries, making them susceptible to criminal problems in the ROK. NK Net's Han also said that difficulty controlling emotions and problems between defectors has resulted in criminal incidents. Kim Il-joo, President of the Association of Supporters for Defecting North Korean Residents, said that some North Koreans become repeat offenders, unable to break the cycle of crime.

¶11. (SBU) Supporters Association President Kim Il-joo told poloff that North Koreans have also been victims of fraud, in particular when involved in joint business or investment projects with South Koreans. Some North Koreans opt to start their own businesses, he said, because of difficulties in obtaining stable employment. Because of their lack of knowledge of the business environment, they can be vulnerable to fraud.

¶12. (SBU) North Koreans may also face legal issues in the ROK, primarily because they are unaware of how the legal system operates and because the ROK does not recognize the DPRK. Kim Young-ja, Secretary-General of Citizens' Alliance, said that many North Koreans are unaware of basic legal procedures. The Association of Supporters for Defecting North Korean Residents and the Korean Bar Association provide specialized legal services to North Koreans.

¶13. (SBU) Supporters Association President Kim Il-joo said that some North Koreans face difficulties if they were married in North Korea and want to get divorced and remarried in the ROK. Because the ROK does not recognize the DPRK, terminating a North Korean marriage is complicated under South Korean law. According to the Korea Legal Aid Center for Family Relations, North Koreans have filed approximately 200 divorce cases in the ROK since July 2003, but divorce was granted in only one case due to debate on whether the ROK courts have jurisdiction over cases where the spouse was still in the DPRK. An amended version of the 1997 Protection Act is currently pending before the National Assembly that includes measures to make it easier for North Koreans to have divorces recognized.

A CHILLY RECEPTION FROM THEIR SOUTH KOREAN BRETHREN

¶14. (SBU) In addition to these challenges, North Korean refugees find that South Koreans often do not provide them with a warm reception. Yu Joon-ha, Director of MOFAT's Inter-Korean Policy Division, reported that South Koreans' attitudes toward North Koreans have changed over time. During the 1990s, North Korean refugees were seen as "freedom fighters" in the ROK, but as the number of North Koreans in the ROK has increased, South Korean attitudes have become less positive. This change was in part due to South Koreans' realization that not all North Korean refugees are "good people;" many South Koreans' patience is also wearing thin.

¶15. (SBU) Members of the NGO community provided similar assessments of South Koreans' attitudes toward North Koreans. Asia Foundation Program Officer Moon Chun-sang said that most South Koreans do not care about the issue of North Korean refugees, as their population is still small. Moon said that, in a homogenous society like the ROK, it is difficult to tell how much of South Koreans' attitudes is general xenophobia and how much is specific to North Koreans. Most South Koreans have never encountered a North Korean refugee. Pomnyun assessed that North Koreans are often seen as second-class citizens by South Koreans because of their

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difficulties in integrating, and suspicions that they bring "bad habits" from North Korea. NK Net President Han Ki-hong also said that the South Korean public tends to look down upon North Koreans, while noting that many practitioners who work with refugees become frustrated by the perceived unwillingness of some North Koreans to adapt. Park Byoung-soo, Deputy Director of the ROK National Human Rights Commission's (NHRC) Human Rights Policy Team, reported that some South Koreans think the ROKG provides too much assistance to North Korean refugees, and argue that they should be given no more assistance than other South Korean recipients of public welfare. One NGO practitioner noted that many South Koreans do not understand the North Korean system or what North Koreans went through, and therefore do not understand the difficulties that North Koreans face in adjusting to life in the ROK when, from the outside, they look like other South Koreans.

¶16. (SBU) Refugees report mixed experiences with South Koreans. One young male North Korean refugee related that many South Koreans do treat North Koreans differently, but thought this was understandable because North Koreans have had different experiences and often have a difficult time relating to South Koreans. An older female refugee similarly reported that people tend to recognize that she is different, believing that she is North Korean or Korean-Chinese, but are helpful when they learn that she is North Korean. Another young male refugee, however, felt alienated in the ROK, and said that South Koreans should be patient with North Korean refugees and treat them as family. Andrei Lankov reported that many refugees share his feelings, which may be linked to difficulty in adapting to the ROK's individualistic culture.

¶17. (SBU) This male refugee was also frustrated with the ROK's emphasis on social networks, particularly school-based networks, in obtaining jobs. In the recent USCHR NK report, Lankov reported that many North Koreans are frustrated by the ROK's system of informal connections (hakyon, or alumni connections, and chiyon, or regional connections), which by their nature exclude outsiders but are important to obtaining employment.

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST NORTH KOREAN REFUGEES

¶18. (SBU) NGO leaders acknowledged that, beyond negative attitudes, some North Korean refugees claim to have faced discrimination in the ROK. Asia Foundation's Moon said that identifying discrimination against North Korean refugees is difficult because North Korean refugees have a heightened

sensitivity to their surroundings and tend to see events through a negative lens. Similarly, KINU's Lee Keum-soon argued that because many North Koreans have unrealistically high expectations when they come to the ROK, they often ascribe any difficulties they experience to discrimination because they are North Korean. Lee and other experts agree that many of these challenges are similar to those faced by most immigrant groups in a new country. Citizens' Alliance's Yoon, who has overseen programs for North Korean refugees for over seven years, argued that many North Korean refugees' claims of discrimination are exaggerated. Chang Chin-yung, an employment officer with the Ministry of Labor, said that, because of psychological or emotional problems, many North Korean refugees may feel discriminated against even if it is not real.

¶19. (SBU) NHRC Human Rights Policy Director Shim Sang-don said that the ROK has sought to address past problems with its resettlement programs. As outlined in septel, NHRC's Park reported that the ROK has changed its protection officer

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system because, in the past, some North Koreans felt the protection was surveillance. According to MOU information, welfare assistance officers working with North Korea receive anti-discrimination training (66 percent had received such training as of June 2006) and Doeumis are required to undergo training by their sponsoring organization. Andrei Lankov argued that the ROKG tolerates refugees' political activities, but thought the ROKG should support those activities with funding, which it does not presently do in significant amounts. Progressive groups in the ROK, Lankov said, have harassed some conservative refugee organizations, but he knew of no instances in which the ROK government itself interfered with North Koreans' rights to free expression.

¶20. (SBU) Under Korean law, it is illegal to discriminate against someone based on national origin and other relevant categories. North Korean refugees have several options if they believe they are facing discrimination, including those available to all ROK citizens and additional services specifically for North Koreans. According to KINU's Lee Keum-soon, North Korean refugees can file complaints through the National Human Rights Commission, the Ministry of Labor (for job discrimination), the Korean Bar Association (which has a special section to assist North Korean refugees), or the Association of Supporters for Defecting North Korean Residents.

¶21. (SBU) NHRC's Shim said that the Commission, which handles human rights claims against the government, currently has eight cases from North Korean refugees, most of which involve political issues challenging the ROK's policy on North Korean human rights and China's policy on North Korean refugees. According to Shim, the only case that alleges discrimination by the ROKG involves a North Korean who defected with Hwang Jang-yop, former third-ranking official in the DPRK. Shim said this individual was a "special case," and the NHRC's case asks for the person to be granted the same type of passport issued to other ROK citizens. NHRC's Park Byoung-soo said that North Koreans in the ROK are normally able to obtain passports after living in the ROK for six months and to travel freely. Shim was not aware of other cases where North Koreans had difficulties obtaining passports, but said that the ROK has to consider that refugees may commit passport fraud to try to bring their families to the ROK.

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

¶22. (SBU) Many of the ROK's programs for North Korean refugees, including those provided by or funded by the government and those run by civil society organizations, include education on human rights issues. KINU's Lee said

that North Koreans are educated on their rights in the ROK at Hanawon. Pak Yong-sok, Director of Hanawon's Education Planning Team, said that Hanawon's curriculum currently includes 37 hours of education on human rights, democracy, market economy, and the rights and obligations of democratic citizens. These programs also include contact information if refugees need legal assistance, steps to take if their rights are violated, and discussions with other resettled North Koreans. Hankyoreh School Principal Gwak Jong-moon said that many North Koreans do not have a concept of what human rights are, and the NHRC conducts programs at the school to inform students of their rights.

¶23. (SBU) The ROK also has started programs aimed at improving South Koreans' attitudes toward resettled North Korean refugees. Hanawon's new exchange programs, where

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North Koreans at Hanawon stay with South Korean families for a short time, not only give North Koreans experience in South Korean communities, but also expose South Koreans to their North Korean peers, Pak said. The Hanbit social welfare center, with funding from the ROKG, recently started its own exchange program, aimed at increasing understanding for both North and South Koreans, but it has been hard to maintain participation on both sides, according to Hanbit.

FOLLOWING THE AMERICAN DREAM

¶24. (SBU) Citizens' Alliance's Kim said that a large number of North Koreans who are dissatisfied with their lives in the ROK believe that the U.S. may offer greater economic opportunities. Numerous NGOs and refugees told poloff of a rumor in the refugee community that the U.S. would provide USD 100,000 in resettlement assistance to North Koreans from the ROK who receive asylum in the U.S. Disappointed that their expectations in the ROK were not fulfilled, some North Koreans decide to follow the American dream and seek ways, legal and illegal, to move to the U.S. Practitioners who work with North Koreans in the ROK dismissed as groundless North Koreans' claims of persecution in the ROK. NHRC's Park said he did not object to the granting of asylum if there were persecution, but questioned the existence of legitimate grounds for asylum.

COMMENT

¶25. (SBU) Life is difficult for North Korean refugees in the ROK, and many will be unable to fulfill their dreams of wealth in the ROK. Our interlocutors agreed that North Koreans may face societal discrimination in the ROK, but none described discrimination by the government or systematic persecution. While experts criticized aspects of the ROK's program, such criticisms focused on issues that one might expect of any government welfare program, not on the ROK's treatment of North Korean refugees. While issues may exist for certain cases of high-level defectors, such as the passport issue described by the NHRC, we have seen no evidence that such issues extend beyond a handful of individuals in the ROK. END COMMENT.

VERSHBOW